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ABSTRACT

Questions about the effectiveness of parent programs are addressed in this paper, which is based on the premise that an important step toward improvement is the identification and clarification of assumptions which prompt and sustain specific program structure and operations. Selected major assumptions about the ways in which programs attempt to influence parents are discussed, and three dimensions of parent programs are examined in order to identify the relationship between prevailing assumptions and program practices: the expertise and role of the professional in working with parents, the development of program standards of good parenting, and conceptions of how parents change. As a preface to the analysis of these areas, current trends and developments in the parent education field are considered. (MP)

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ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PARENT EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF PROGRAM ASSUMPTIONS

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The field of parent education is flourishing. The number of programs for parents is growing rapidly as professionals and policymakers give increased attention to the influence of families on early child development, and to the stresses of parenthood. The diverse array of programs now in existence has caused the parent education field to take on a fragmented and diffuse character, with parent programs varying considerably in terms of aims, methods, and theoretical orientations to child development. In spite of the long history of parent education, never before have there been so many program models and tested ways to work with parents of young children.

Questions which surface frequently in discussions of parent education pertain to effective ways to provide programs for parents: What is the most successful approach? What really works? These and similar questions gain importance as interest in parent education increases, the diversity of program approaches expands, and resources for program support become scarce. The answers are not as readily available as the questions, of course. Partly, this is due to a limited empirical data base. Also, the variety of programs makes it difficult to generalize findings from one program to other programs or settings. More importantly, though, the lack of thorough answers to questions relating to program effectiveness reflects a narrowly defined view of the issues which must be confronted when carrying out an effective parent education program.

This chapter addresses questions of program effectiveness by analyzing selected major assumptions about the ways in which programs attempt to influence parents. The premise of this chapter is that an important step toward the improvement of program effectiveness is the identification and clarification of assumptions which prompt and sustain specific program

structures and operations. These assumptions often are implicit or unacknowledged in the design and delivery of programs, but they play a central role in providing a framework for program efforts to change parents' childrearing beliefs, knowledge, and skills. A careful investigation of the underlying suppositions or theoretical origins of specific program operations--at a general level as well as within individual programs--may establish a firm foundation for considering strategies to enhance program effectiveness.

The following dimensions of parent programs are examined in this chapter: (1) the expertise and role of the professional in working with parents, (2) the development of program standards of "good parenting," and (3) conceptions of how parents change. The intent is to explore each of these areas in terms of the relationship between prevailing assumptions and program practices. As a preface to analysis of these areas, current trends and developments in the parent education field are considered.

THE GREENING OF PARENT EDUCATION

In recent years, the parent education label has come to represent many different types of programs. The term is no longer limited to conventional didactic instruction in child development. The field now encompasses such varied efforts as home-based parent training, small clusters of parents who function as self-help groups, short-term lecture/discussion courses on family relations conducted in work settings, and educational experiences which seek to strengthen parents' use of community institutions. There is great variation among programs in terms of frequency and duration of contact with parents, structure, personnel, curriculum content, and inclusion or exclusion of the child.

The broadening of the parent education field is exemplified in the changes which have taken place in programmatic approaches to early childhood intervention in the past decade. The focus of many intervention programs has expanded recently to include the family as well as the preschool child. This shift is in response to the growing body of research data which suggest that the benefits of early education may be maximized if there is a significant level of parent involvement (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1974). This reorientation also is based on the argument that a focus on parents is more cost-effective than a child-only focus because the parent program ultimately may affect siblings other than the target child, the benefits may be sustained by the parent after the program ends, and there may be an unintended by-product of self-growth in the parent, such as job training (Powell, 1982-a).

The ways in which early intervention programs work with parents vary considerably. The experience of Head Start provides a case in point. Although parent involvement has been an important part of Head Start since its beginning, recent developments have moved many Head Start programs toward a family focus. Three program models within Head Start give particular emphasis to parents and the entire family: Home Start, the Parent Child Centers, and the Child and Family Resource Program. The latter program, launched in 11 locations throughout the United States in 1973, is the most family-focused demonstration program ever undertaken within Head Start. The unit of enrollment is the family rather than the child. A key element of the program is an assessment which examines needs, strengths, and goals of the family. This leads to a Family Action Plan which addresses an array of family needs (i.e., health, social services, education, child care) and includes specific steps toward

realization of a family's goals (O'Keefe, 1979). A recent review of Head Start by a distinguished group of scholars and national leaders recommended that components of the Child and Family Resource Program be incorporated into existing Head Start programs (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1980).

Perhaps the "newest kids on the block" in the parent education field are members of the growing group of parent or family support programs. These programs may be distinguished from traditional parent education programs in their lack of a predetermined curriculum or imposed content, and in their emphasis on individual or family functioning. Instead of (or in addition to) focusing on the parent's direct contribution to the child's cognitive development, support programs tend to deal with the parent's experiences in the parenthood role and in managing the affairs of everyday life. In some programs, for instance, there is no established curriculum of lessons on child development; rather, the content of parent group discussions is determined largely by parents' interests (Powell, in press-b; Wandersman, Wandersman, & Kahn, 1980). Parent or family support programs usually capitalize on the value of meaningful interpersonal ties with peers in adjusting to the demands of childrearing and typically do not place staff in a dominant role in "teaching" parents or even in determining the topic of group discussions. As will be discussed later, support programs represent a markedly different orientation to working with parents in terms of assumptions about parents' needs, interests, and processes of change.

A recent major trend in the parent education field is the increased attention to the social contexts in which parents function. A conclusion of Bronfenbrenner's (1974) analysis of the effectiveness of early intervention

programs was that ecological intervention in the form of family support systems would be an effective way to enhance the development of children. The goals and activities of a growing number of programs are consistent with this notion of intervention. The focus is on a parent's or family's relationship with its immediate environment. For instance, a major goal of the Child and Family Resource Program within Head Start is to link families to community resources (O'Keefe, 1979). A basis for this and similar programs is that environmental forces such as neighborhoods and local human services have an important influence on the quality of childrearing, and that an appropriate target of intervention is the parent/ environment relationship (Powell, 1979). This approach contrasts markedly with parent education programs which view the quality of childrearing to be largely a function of a parent's child development knowledge.

It is debatable whether programs which emphasize support and/or have concern for a family's relations with its community fall within the parent education field. White (1977) has noted the distinction between parent education and "family welfare" programs, arguing that professional educators are qualified to deal with educational issues and not with such matters as poor jobs and inadequate housing. No doubt this question is one of the most disturbing tensions in the field today. What are the boundaries of the parent education field? The issue is difficult to resolve partly because it is not clear when a program activity is "noneducational." Is helping a parent learn skills to make effective use of a local resource such as a medical clinic an educational or a welfare matter? The issue also is problematic in that traditional parent education as well as family-oriented and parent support programs generally have the same ultimate goal--the improvement of child development. In addition, the labels assigned to

programs may be a superficial, if not misleading, representation of the actual program. Indeed, this writer has observed a number of family and parent "support" programs where it appeared that the concept of support actually was a new euphemism for subtle but intentional professional directives on how to educate a preschool child.

The parent education field, then, is maturing. Like any growing system, it is experiencing substantive expansion and differentiation. The field has transcended the traditional education of parents about child development to include a focus on the entire family and to embrace an interest in a parent's or a family's relations with the environment. Programs differ in terms of their emphasis on child development, parent development, and family development. And like any growing system, a struggle has accompanied the growth. Questions about the field's identity--what parent education is and is not--emerge as new ways are developed to help parents become better parents. Conflicts arise as experts debate the merits of, for example, teaching a parent a cognitive stimulation technique versus helping a family function more effectively.

Another indication of the field's maturity is the increasing realization that parent education is not a panacea for society's ills. The current wave of interest in parent programs was ushered in with enormously high expectations. Federal education officials argued that "every child has a right to a trained parent" (Bell, 1975), while researchers demonstrated the strong influence of parents on child growth and development (see Schaefer, 1972, for a review). For many, the key to a new, better society rests with the education of parents. For example, Rheingold (1973) proposed a new profession (composed of "scientists of rearing")

which would acquire and test knowledge on the rearing of children. To her, the need for these scientists was obvious:

> Parents-to-be must be certified as to their competence, and a practical examination is better than a paper one. We must take an examination to obtain a license to drive a car. The child deserves no less; the good of the country demands much more. (p. 45)

Unfortunately, Rheingold did not address seriously the problems of determining and measuring parental competence. As this chapter explores later, a major issue in parent education surrounds the question of who is to determine what constitutes "good parenting." Rheingold also assumed that parental knowledge is the primary influence on parent behavior, thereby ignoring the potentially significant impact of socioecological forces (e.g., unemployment). Moreover, child development is influenced by more than parents.

To view parental influences in isolation from other forces in the child's life is as inadequate as viewing schools as totally responsible for a child's achievement (Schlossman, 1978). By examining carefully what Cremin (1978) calls the "configurations of education" (i.e., home, school, church) historically and for the present day, we begin to understand that many interconnected agencies are involved in a child's life. Whether more realistic expectations of the outcomes of parent education will be sustained long-term remains to be seen. An examination of the history of parent education in the United States suggests that new waves of interest have been characterized by high hopes for an improved social order (Schlossman, 1976).

This brief review of current trends in the parent education field underscores the longstanding, superordinate assumption in our culture that parents require training in the rearing of young children. Inherent

in all theories of the child is the notion that lay people--especially parents--need expert advice in the care of children (Kessen, 1979).

Historically, a prevalent assumption has been that low-income parents are in particular need of training. For example, a major goal of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in the early 1900s (then known as the National Congress of Mothers) was to work with poor families. Mothers' clubs for women of limited financial resources were led by PTA members in an effort to disseminate current knowledge on child care and family life (Schlossman, 1976). In the 1960s and early 1970s, research on mother/child interaction was interpreted as suggesting that low-income home environments were "culturally disadvantaged" and that this deprivation was the cause of poor academic achievement among children from low-income families. The white middle-class bias in this deficit model orientation has been criticized heavily (e.g., Lightfoot, 1978), and more recently there has been an emphasis on differences between children from varied social and racial backgrounds rather than a focus on deficiencies. A recent study, for instance, suggests that differences between lower- and middle-class children may represent "stylistic patterns rather than capacity differences" (Yando, Seitz, & Zigler, 1979, p. 107).

The tendency to view low-income groups as in greater need of parent education than other groups points to a critical issue in the field today: Who needs parent education? Even with the deficit model discarded, persuasive arguments exist that low-income population groups need parent programs more than middle-class populations due to the stressful conditions of poverty. Bronfenbrenner (1978) has answered this question by proposing that the groups most in need of parent education are those who do not yet or never will have children. He suggests that the progressive

fragmentation and isolation of the family in its childrearing role leads to the need to reeducate society's decision makers about the necessary and sufficient conditions for making human beings human. Bronfenbrenner has argued that parent education should focus on the conditions of parenthood--forces external to the family which impinge on childrearing--and that an effective way to improve the conditions of parenthood is to educate "workers, neighbors, friends . . . members of organizations, committees and boards" (p. 783) about the difficult circumstances which affect the capacity of the family to function.

It is impossible to decide who needs parent education without specifying the type of program potentially of greatest value. A more useful question, then, is, Who needs what type of parent education? This enables consideration of the match between specific population groups and the particular goals and methods of programs. An examination of the match between program and participant necessitates an analysis of assumptions behind the design and delivery of parent education programs. Selected major assumptions of parent programs are examined in the remainder of this chapter.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE AND ROLES

A core component of a parent education program is the interpersonal relationship between parents and program staff. Parent education, like all other education, is a "people-changing" enterprise; the aim of most programs is to enhance parent/child interaction by changing some aspect of parents' behavior, knowledge, or attitudes. It is through the management of the parent/professional relationship that staff attempt to influence parents. Interactions with parents typically are concerned with change

(e.g., introducing a concept or a skill) or with monitoring parents' behaviors (e.g., determining whether a knowledge or a skill level is acceptable). Program workers are not mere deliverers of a curriculum or treatment plan; indeed program content is shaped significantly by the way in which it is handled by staff (e.g., one staff member may highlight a point that another staff member ignores, even though both were "trained" according to the same curriculum).

The parent education literature has given minimal attention to the roles of staff in working with parents. It appears that interest in curriculum development has overshadowed concern for the way in which a curriculum is implemented. However, recent work raises questions about the importance of particular curriculum approaches in influencing parent and child outcomes in parent education programs. A study of the effects of three different curricula (language, cognitive, and social) in a home-based parent education program for mothers of toddlers found no differences in children's IQ test competence in relation to curriculum type (Kessen, Fein, Clarke-Stewart, & Starr, 1975). Similarly, in an analysis of the effects of 28 parent training programs, Goodson and Hess (1976) found no relationship between the content of the curriculum and the degree of program impact on children's cognitive skills. These findings are similar to the results of a curriculum comparison study in early childhood education by Weikart, Epstein, Schweinhart, and Bond (1978). The lack of differences in children's cognitive growth in relation to different curricula prompted the conclusion that the principal issue in early education is not which curriculum to use but how to manage any curriculum to achieve positive results.

Most parent education workers are keenly aware of the importance of their relations with parents. Staff members knowingly or unknowingly expend a good deal of energy in the development and maintenance of credibility and acceptance vis-a-vis parents. The "presentation of self" generally is not treated lightly; such details as dress, disclosure of personal and/or professional background, and style of engaging parents are crucial ingredients in exchanges with parents. As one parent program worker put it recently, "What parent would believe me if I weren't seen as knowledgeable and approachable?" There is an important assumption in this statement: A parent's perception of the professional as credible and warm is a prerequisite to the parent's acceptance and implementation of the program's messages.

A more fundamental assumption of this staff member's statement, however, is that the professional has something to say which the parent should believe. This assumption appears to be dominant in the vast majority of parent education programs today. Professional roles and behaviors are based on a view of the professional as a giver and the parent as a receiver of expert knowledge. It is assumed that the professional knows something that the parent does not know and, moreover, that it is in the best interests of the parent to find out what the professional knows.

The professional-as-expert orientation increasingly is under attack in the parent education field as questions are raised about the value of professional involvement in such intimate family matters as childrearing (Lasch, 1977). Dokecki, Roberts, and Moroney (1979) have suggested that the view of professionals as knowledge-givers and parents as knowledge-receivers is an inappropriate conceptualization of parent education. They state the following: "Parent educators typically assume that parents are

less than competent adults, with limited experiential knowledge of children and little basic childrearing information" (p. 11). This approach, they argue, is the major problem with parent education today and accounts for the low levels of participation and relatively low effectiveness of many formal parent education programs.

To what extent is there an expert knowledge base that professionals can impart to parents and which parents would find to be useful? The traditional response is that a good deal of child development research and theory is relevant to parents and, if disseminated or "packaged" properly, parents would find it useful. This assumption supports the notion that the ideal parent has been trained and authorized by experts; there is a body of knowledge which must be mastered prior to the granting of "licensure" in parenting. At the other extreme is the idea that child development research data are too inconclusive, too contradictory, and too general to be taken as hard facts. This orientation was aired in a recent New York Times (1981) article ("The Childhood 'Industry': Conflicting Advice") in which statements such as the following were attributed to nationally renowned research psychologists: "Parents should trust no one . . . they should always be skeptical when the conclusion comes from the discoverers themselves," and "Why do we need all this (expert child-rearing) advice? Much of it is bubba psychology--from the Russian word for grandmother. What are these people selling that a grandmother couldn't tell you?"

There is a small but growing number of parent programs which seem to reflect this latter perspective. One example is a project initiated in Syracuse, New York, by Urie Bronfenbrenner and Moncrieff Cochran and

their colleagues at Cornell University. A central belief of this program is that

> the most valid and useful knowledge about the rearing of children is lodged among the people, across generations, in the networks, and in the historically and culturally rooted folkways of ethnic and cultural traditions, rather than in the heads of college professors, trained professionals or the books written by the so-called experts. (Cochran & Woolever, in press)

In this program, then, parents are viewed as the experts. The child development knowledge base is generated by parents, not professionals. Home visitors learn about the parent's view of the child and seek out examples of activities that are carried out successfully (in the parent's judgment) with the child. Descriptions of these parent/child activities (e.g., cooking, setting table for a meal) are prepared by the home visitor and then shared with other parents.

A middle position, perhaps, in the question of useful childrearing knowledge is that professional knowledge is different from the knowledge of parents; it is not superior, but complementary. Professionals possess information about children as a group and about children in particular situations (e.g., within a laboratory situation), while parents have much information about their child as an individual and about his or her behaviors in specific settings. Both knowledge bases, if creatively combined, may be useful in enhancing the development of children (Dokecki et al., 1979). Increasingly child development experts are organizing the presentation of research literature in ways that permit a useful application of research knowledge to practical situations (e.g., Zigler & Kagan, 1982).

The interest in a partnership or collaborative relationship between parents and professionals stems partly from dissatisfaction with the professional-as-expert paradigm (Weikart et al., 1978; Kessen et al.,

1975). There appears to be a variety of ways in which this concept may be implemented. One variant of this arrangement is to combine the professional's general information about children and the parent's particular information about the child. For instance, a collaborative approach to the problem of how a parent might handle a child's separation anxiety may be realized through a pooling of the professional's knowledge of attachment behavior in general and a parent's information about a particular child's responses to separation from a parent. Presumably this approach requires a significant amount of mutual respect and basic understanding about how the partners are to determine what information is useful and legitimate. The parent-as-expert approach in the Cornell project also is suggestive of a collaborative relationship, although here the collaboration is not toward pooling separate sources of knowledge (the parent's and professional's) but toward the development of the parent-determined base of knowledge about childrearing--the professional collaborates with the parent as a facilitator. Interestingly, the program worker does not appear to lose expert status in this arrangement. The expertise is in facilitation, not child development, however. More attention will be given to the notion of collaboration in the next section of this chapter.

The question of whether professionals possess useful knowledge for working with parents is delicate because it tampers with the professional status of those who work with young children and parents. One of the attributes of a profession is to claim control of a body of knowledge that serves as the technology of the occupational group (Hughes, 1971). The more sophisticated and complex the knowledge base, the higher the professional status of the occupation. A fundamental problem of the child care field--and presumably parent education as well--is the perceived lack

of a distinctive body of knowledge that provides a foundation for the field (Powell, 1982-b; Joffe, 1977). To "take away" or diminish in some way the child development knowledge base of parent education, then, has implications for professional status as well as professional roles unless a new form of expertise (e.g., facilitating group discussion among parents) is substituted. Without claim to some type of specialty, what distinguishes the program worker from the parent?

Clearly, parents differ significantly in what they find to be "useful" information from a parent education program. There are different needs for parent education; quite simply, some parents have an easier time with childrearing than others. Should not professional roles be determined partly by the type of assistance a parent seems to require? Dokecki et al. (1979) have conceptualized a continuum of parent education needs and corresponding professional responses. The continuum may be expressed in terms of four levels which are not static or mutually exclusive. Level I entails parents "who provide well for their children on a day-to-day basis and . . . [who] evidence no obvious parent education needs (p. 16). The appropriate professional response is a "prospective mode" wherein the program worker "looks forward" to future developmental needs of the child and provides anticipatory guidance. This is the least intrusive professional role in the continuum of responses. Level II consists of parents who "manage well most of the time, but who are somewhat uneasy about specific childrearing skills" and who "unknowingly engage in certain childrearing practices that are likely to lead to difficulties in the future" (p. 16). Here it is suggested that the professional response be within a "resource mode" wherein the professional is available to parents who inquire about specific childrearing matters.

At Level III of the Dokecki et al. (1979) continuum are those whose parent education needs are "obvious" because their children have difficulty in relating to others, including their parents. However, this group of parents may be "doing many things well" and is "a long way from abdicating the parent role" (p. 17). The professional response is a "collaborative mode"; the parent and professional work together to identify possible solutions to problems causing difficulty for the child. Level IV involves parents whose "social, emotional, and material resources are not sufficient to provide for the growth and developmental needs of their child" (p. 17). Here the professional may need to act in a "protective mode" to protect the child and/or parent.

This typology of parent needs and professional responses raises the question of who determines the parent's need level. Who decides, for instance, that a parent is relating to a child in ways which may lead to difficulties? The assessment of parent education needs is a sensitive matter which entails careful consideration of value differences in childrearing. It is to this issue that we now turn.

PROGRAM STANDARDS OF "GOOD PARENTING"

All well-functioning parent education programs include a general understanding or concept of what constitutes "good parenting." That is, there is at least a minimum level of agreement about appropriate and inappropriate parental goals, attitudes, and behaviors. It appears that in most cases this concept is of an implicit nature and that its development is influenced primarily by program staff. As Clarke-Stewart (1978) has noted, the assumption of most programs is "that the mother's goals for herself and her child are the same as the program designer's--or would be if the mother knew better" (p. 90). This assumption has been questioned

vigorously, especially from the standpoint of professionals imposing their values on parents. There is debate as to whether value conflicts actually exist and, if so, what strategies might be effective in remedying the problem.

Concern about the extent to which parent education programs respect existing parental practices stems from the growing recognition and acceptance of cultural pluralism and sociocultural diversity in parents' behavior. Laosa (in press) has described the concern in this manner:

> To some, the current parent education movement sees yet another attempt to melt away sociocultural diversity by imposing one group's standard of parenting over others. The "melting pot" view of American society called for the amalgamation of all subcultures into a new and superior culture. It now seems clear that an amalgamation model, when directed by a dominant class, leads to the melting away of the other subcultures and to the preponderance of one group over the others.

This issue may be particularly critical in programs where middle-class professionals deal with low-income parents. The matter of sex role socialization is an example of potential conflict. Middle-class professionals typically support parental behavior which reduces conventional sex role typing; it is appropriate, for example, for boys to play with dolls. Many working-class and low-income parents (especially fathers) do not object to conventional sex roles and probably would have a vehement reaction to their young sons playing with dolls. Childrearing values, not scientific data, are in conflict (Powell, 1982-a). Criticisms also have been made of the practice of having parents function as classroom aides to teachers, where the expectation is that parents will incorporate some or most of the curriculum into the home. The apparent assumption is that the teacher's behaviors are superior to the parent's. But should the school culture dominate the home (see Powell, 1982-a)? Will the status of the parent be

diminished from the child's perspective if the parent functions in the shadow of the teacher's authority (see Fein, 1980)?

There are no systematic data with regard to the prevalence of value conflicts between parents and staff in parent education programs. In fact, several studies indicate that conflicts are minimal or nonexistent. Levenstein (1971) found that the low-income mothers in her home-based parent education program had aspirations for their children which paralleled those of middle-class mothers. Similarly, Elardo and Caldwell (1973) found that parents and teachers involved in an inner-city intervention program in Little Rock, Arkansas, shared similar objectives and goals for children (e.g., to know concepts such as smooth, round, scratchy; to follow teachers' requests; to ask "Why" questions). While there were several areas of disagreement (e.g., exhibiting aggression in schools), the researchers concluded that far more consonance than dissonance exists in childrearing values among parents and teachers.

Given the potential (if not the actual) problem of parent/staff value conflicts, an important question is how to establish standards of parental behavior in parent education programs. How might a concept of "good parenting" be established which represents the values of parents and staff?

The idea of a "shared partnership" or a collaborative relationship between parents and staff often is suggested as a method for dealing with real or potential value conflicts. This approach was discussed earlier in this chapter in terms of respecting and utilizing parents' information about their children. Collaboration is a promising concept which appears to be favored among a growing number of parent education programs. Unfortunately, little is known about the ways in which the idea is operationalized.

Exactly how do parents and professionals identify and resolve differences of opinion? What types of negotiation processes occur? Is there in fact a genuine collaboration, or do some programs merely use the label because it is in vogue?

One way to structure parental input into the development of program activities and policies is to place parents in decision-making roles. In the early childhood field there have been attempts to guarantee respect for the rights of parents by giving power to parents for such matters as personnel selection (see Fein, 1980, for a critique). The original Head Start mandate, for example, called for the "maximum feasible participation" of parents (Valentine & Stark, 1979) It appears that this strategy has not been used extensively in parent education programs, probably because of the obvious threat to professional autonomy and because of the inherent conflict in having the recipient or client of a service (parents) also serve to make decisions about the scope, content, and delivery of the service.

Parent support programs also offer an alternative way to deal with parent/staff value differences. The expectation here is that staff would help parents achieve goals which parents themselves would define. External values and assumptions would not be imposed on parents in the form of a preconceived intervention. More research is needed on the inner workings of such programs. It is questionable whether professionals can and should go about their work within a value-free (versus value-specific) framework. Is it possible or desirable for a program worker to support parental goals that conflict markedly with those of the worker?

Again we see a violation of traditional conceptions of professionalism in the roles of professionals in collaborative relationships with parents and in support programs. A characteristic of a well-established profession is

that it is the professional, not the client, who defines client needs and prescribes a remedy (Powell, 1982-b). It is unusual for professionals to assume roles where the client has considerable influence on the formulation of needs and goals. This issue is heightened in the early childhood field because significant parental involvement may be viewed as a threat of lay control over an occupational group that has a fledgling professional identity (Joffe, 1977).

Another strategy to deal with the problem of conflicting values and goals in a parent education program is to admit only parents who are sympathetic to the program orientation. A self-selection process among parents might accomplish the same goal if program values are communicated clearly during the recruitment of participants. Presumably this is what happens with many parent discussion groups where there is a particular theoretical framework (e.g., commitment to behavioristic principles versus a psychoanalytic orientation). Self-selection serves to reduce struggles about appropriate approaches to childrearing and probably provides an important common bond or identity among participants. This strategy is unlikely to be effective, at least politically, for community-based programs which attempt to serve populations defined by geographic boundaries rather than by childrearing value orientations.

The use of community paraprofessionals sometimes is viewed as a way to make programs sensitive to the childrearing values of parents, especially where low-income populations are served. Many programs use paraprofessionals as primary staff persons (e.g., home visitors, discussion group leaders). Paraprofessionals are expected to bring unique skills, perspectives, and affiliations, which strengthen a parent's relations with his or her community and program participants. A major problem with this

strategy is to maintain the integrity of the paraprofessional role. There is a tendency among some professional staff to diminish the significance of this unique role (e.g., to disregard paraprofessionals' ideas for program content), thereby threatening paraprofessionals' liaison role with the community and program participants (Gottlieb, 1981). There is a significant role difference between a paraprofessional who functions as a catalyst for program responsiveness to parents and a paraprofessional who serves as a messenger in a one-way communication channel from professional to parent (Powell, in press-b).

While the focus of this section has been on parent/staff relationships in the development of program standards of appropriate parental behavior, it is important to comment briefly on the assumption underlying the content of increasing numbers of parent programs. The content in question pertains to the "parents-as-teachers" approach to parent education. Many programs today emphasize parents' contributions to a child's academic skills and engage parents in activities and roles which parallel the typical functions of a teacher. Clearly there is potential benefit in enhancing the teaching behaviors and orientations of parents. But traditional teaching behaviors differ qualitatively from parenting behaviors. Recent research indicates there are differences in the child care patterns of parents and preschool teachers (Hess, Price, Dickson, & Conroy, 1981), and Katz (1980) has set forth major theoretical distinctions between parenting and teaching in such areas as attachment level, intensity of affect, degree of spontaneity, and scope of responsibility. The question is whether distinctions between parenting and teaching are recognized in "parents-as-teachers" educational programs. Are behaviors and attitudes traditionally associated with parenting (e.g., unconditional love) supported alongside an

emphasis on teaching behaviors, or is the main message that appropriate parental behaviors approximate those of a teacher? Katz cites the case of a mother whose participation in a teaching-oriented parent education program led to confusion about her role and to a deterioration of the mother/son relationship due to her anxiety in carrying out program expectations. The parent's tension was accompanied by the realization that "the boy had no mother" in terms of her usual soft, nondemanding approach. A difficult task for parent programs, then, is to introduce concepts and processes without undermining valuable, existing dimensions of the parent/child relationship.

CONCEPTIONS OF HOW PARENTS CHANGE

A critical and yet usually ignored attribute of parent programs in terms of overall effectiveness deals with conceptions of how parents change. What assumptions underlie particular program strategies regarding efforts to influence parents' behaviors and beliefs? What are the images of how parents respond to information, program activities, and experiences?

A dominant assumption in most parent education programs is that parents respond to expert opinion and information. It is assumed that parents will change in the intended direction upon receipt of information or advice from a program worker or fellow program participant. While this assumption seems quite plausible, there is not a convincing set of research data to support the idea. In a critical review of parent training programs, Clarke-Stewart (1978) concluded that parents' childrearing behaviors and attitudes are connected to sociocultural traditions and socioeconomic circumstances, and that there is no evidence that childrearing practices are determined by expert opinion or literature on child care and development.

In view of the paucity of carefully designed studies on this topic, it seems premature to conclude that expert opinion cannot affect parental practices. Longitudinal research with different population groups is needed to determine the relative impact of different influences on parents' childrearing behaviors and knowledge. Especially needed is an understanding of the conditions under which parents carry out the suggestions of experts (e.g., when expert advice is consistent with existing ideas?).

Unfortunately, little is known about the ways in which parents respond to program information or experiences. It appears that the socio-ecological contexts in which parents function play an important role in mediating program influence. For instance, a parent's personal social network ties (relations with relatives, friends, neighbors) have been found to be related to use of formal agencies and programs (for a review, see Unger & Powell, 1980). For example, parents have been found to use informal social network ties extensively in searching for a child care provider (Powell & Eisenstadt, 1982). It appears that, when in need of professionally delivered services, individuals consult with familiar and trusted persons about the availability and quality of formal services.

Regarding parent education programs, Kessen et al. (1975) found that working-class parents who belonged to extensive family networks were more responsive to a home-based parent education curriculum than parents with restricted family networks. The study suggests that extensive family ties may provide parents with a secure, stable framework which facilitates acceptance and utilization of new information from change agents outside the family milieu (e.g., home visitors). It also supports findings of several other studies (see Unger & Powell, 1980) which suggest that restricted (or close-knit) social network ties operate as a social control

mechanism to keep out external information which is discrepant with the beliefs of the family network.

One of the reasons there is a dearth of information about the processes of change in parent programs is that evaluators largely have ignored variations in parents' experiences in a program. The tendency has been to view the program as a unidimensional construct rather than as a set of variables; typically, the treatment is viewed as present or absent (Powell, in press-c). Recent evidence suggests considerable variation in parents' experiences in a parent program, however. A preliminary analysis of patterns of participation in a neighborhood-based parent support program suggests differences in terms of such factors as interpersonal ties with other participants, use of staff services, and involvement in special program activities. Moreover, the analysis showed that diverse participation patterns were related to parents' life conditions (i.e., economic hardship, type of social network ties). For instance, it was found that parents who participated in the program's special events (e.g., field trips) also were involved in other community organizations. It appears that a certain interest or skill level in negotiating social systems facilitated participation in the program's "extracurricular" activities. These data suggest that parents respond in different ways to the same program setting, and in a manner consistent with past and present life circumstances (Powell, in press-a).

Most parents do not enter parent education programs as blank slates. The content domain is familiar territory. Parents approach a program with many experiences and ideas about the processes of parenting; indeed, one of the influences on parental behavior is one's own childhood experiences. Perhaps a major step toward recognition of this dynamic is to conceptualize

parent education as a form of adult education (Dokecki et al., 1979). Adult learners need to accommodate new information and experiences with previous knowledge; discrepant information may be distorted to fit existing understandings, for instance. In the education of adults, it is important for the learner to identify objectives and methods of learning. Time should be devoted to an exploration of a learner's previous experiences and knowledge regarding the topic (Knox, 1977). The lack of attention to the principles of adult education may account for the ineffectiveness of some parent education programs.

Recent research evidence points to the importance of parents' belief systems and conceptualizations of the child, and by implication suggests that the effectiveness of parent education programs depends partly on methods (e.g., group discussion) which recognize parents' existing constructs of child development. Sigel and his associates (see McGillicuddy-DeLisi, Sigel, & Johnson, 1979) have carried out an investigation of parents' belief systems which is based partly on George Kelly's personal construct theory. Kelly (1955) has proposed that each individual formulates his or her own personal constructs based on experiences, and that the world is viewed through these constructs. New experiences (e.g., a parent program) may confirm or disconfirm previously evolved constructions. Sigel and his colleagues found that the constructs referred to by parents fall into patterns which resemble established theoretical perspectives of child development. While parents did not use psychological terms to represent their views, it was possible to classify parents according to maturational, Skinnerian, information-processing, and psychoanalytic models of human development. Also, Sutherland (in press) found participants in parent education programs to have well-developed "folk models" of childrearing which parallel traditional theories of child development.

It appears essential, then, for the design and delivery of parent education programs to be based on a recognition of the complexities of adult change processes. The socioecological conditions of parents' lives as well as parents' constructions of how children develop seem to be major factors which bear directly on the influence of program workers. Clearly, expert opinion is only one of many interrelated forces in a parent's world. Future research needs to examine carefully the interplay among the diverse determinants of parental attitudes and practices.

A CONCLUDING COMMENT

The questions about program effectiveness posed at the beginning of this chapter--What is the most successful approach? and What really works?--imply a limited view of how to enhance parents' roles and practices. Inherent in these questions is the idea that some approaches are better than others. Although many diverse approaches and strategies have been found to be effective, the search for "the very best" program model is likely to be futile. A more exciting, potentially worthwhile venture is to uncover the conditions under which programs are effective. This should be a high priority for the parent education field. This chapter has highlighted three areas of program functioning which appear to have a major influence on program effectiveness: professional roles, program incorporation of parental values, and conceptions of adult change processes. This treatment of program parts has been selective; there are other salient program dimensions, as well as different ways to conceptualize the issues. It is hoped that this chapter's examination of selected program parts has pointed to a clear message about programs as a whole: the issue of program effectiveness entails significantly more than consideration of the curriculum.

Effective parent education is not a simple process. Program designers and operators need to make many critical decisions about the focus and methods of change. The premise of this chapter is that the improvement of program effectiveness begins with a careful scrutiny of the assumptions which form the basis of program structure and content. An exploration of basic program assumptions is likely to provide a framework for specifying expectations of program activities, assessing the usefulness of particular practices, and considering alternative approaches. Not all beneficial aspects of a program begin with the question, How? There also is value in asking, Why?

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